



Elizabeth Bishop

(1911-1979)

The Fish (1955)

I caught a tremendous fish
and held him beside the boat
half out of water, with my hook
fast in a corner of his mouth.
He didn't fight.
He hadn't fought at all.
He hung a grunting weight,
battered and venerable
and homely. Here and there
his brown skin hung in strips
like ancient wall-paper,
and its pattern of darker brown
was like wall-paper:
shapes like full-blown roses
stained and lost through age.
He was speckled with barnacles,
fine rosettes of lime,
and infested
with tiny white sea-lice,
and underneath two or three
rags of green weed hung down.
While his gills were breathing in
the terrible oxygen
--the frightening gills
fresh and crisp with blood,
that can cut so badly--
I thought of the coarse white flesh
packed in like feathers,

the big bones and the little bones,
the dramatic reds and blacks
of his shiny entrails,
and the pink swim-bladder
like a big peony.
I looked into his eyes
which were far larger than mine
but shallower, and yellowed,
the irises backed and packed
with tarnished tinfoil
seen through the lenses
of old scratched isinglass.
They shifted a little, but not
to return my stare.
--It was more like the tipping
of an object toward the light.
I admired his sullen face,
the mechanism of his jaw,
and then I saw
that from his lower lip
--if you could call it a lip--
grim, wet, and weapon-like,
hung five old pieces of fish-line,
or four and a wire leader
with the swivel still attached,
with all their five big hooks
grown firmly in his mouth.
A green line, frayed at the end
where he broke it, two heavier lines,
and a fine black thread
still crimped from the strain and snap
when it broke and he got away.
Like medals with their ribbons
frayed and wavering,
a five-haired beard of wisdom
trailing from his aching jaw.
I stared and stared
and victory filled up
the little rented boat,
from the pool of bilge
where oil had spread a rainbow
around the rusted engine
to the bailer rusted orange,
the sun-cracked thwarts,
the oarlocks on their strings,
the gunnels--until everything
was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!
And I let the fish go.

ANALYSIS

Unlike so many modern poems, the main beauty and glory of this poem comes right from the surface. But what a surface! On its objectivity it combines the precision of the research scientist with the depth perception and sensitivity of the poet, culminating in a miracle. There appear to be four movements in the

poem. First comes an extraordinary series of images (lines 1-26), precisely describing, with almost no emotion, the outside appearance of the tremendous fish, for example:

his brown skin hung in strips
like ancient wall-paper,
(lines 10-11)

shapes like full-blown roses
stained and lost through age.
(lines 14-15)

He was speckled with barnacles,
fine rosettes of lime,
and infested
with tiny white sea-lice,
and underneath two or three
rags of green weed hung down.
(lines 16 -21)

Emotion quickens lines 22-26 with mention of the bloody gills. The poet not only sees the fish but, as John Ciardi says, she “sees into it.” The second movement (lines 27-33) is an interlude in which the fisherman [*sic*--angler?] visualizes the fish’s insides. High point here is an unforgettable comparison:

and the pink swim-bladder
like a big peony.
(lines 32-33)

The third movement (lines 34-60) returns to objective, minute description, this time of the fish’s eyes:

the irises backed and packed
with tarnished tinfoil
seen through the lenses
of old scratched isinglass.
(lines 37-40)

The fisherman now looks closely at the “sullen face,” its lower lip hung with five big hooks and broken fishlines. The turning point of the poem comes in line 61, which begins the fourth movement, or finale. Preparing for the miracle at the end, the poet sees the hooks and old pieces of fishline “Like medals with their ribbons” trailing “a five-haired beard of wisdom” from the fish’s aching jaw. Now at the last the fish has won the admiration and tender sympathy of the fisherman. A rainbow made from the oil slick on the pool of bilge “around the rusted engine” is a symbol of the old fish’s sixth and final victory. The rainbow fills the boat with its glory and the fisherman lets the fish go. Thus ends one of the most beautiful and deeply sympathetic poems of the mid-century.

James M. Reid
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